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# Sunset

SEPTEMBER 2002

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# The world beyond the waves

One glimpse of Channel Islands National Park will capture you for a lifetime

By Peter Fish • Photographs by William B. Dewey

■ Once upon a time, an island shamed and enchanted me, and I've longed to return to it ever since.

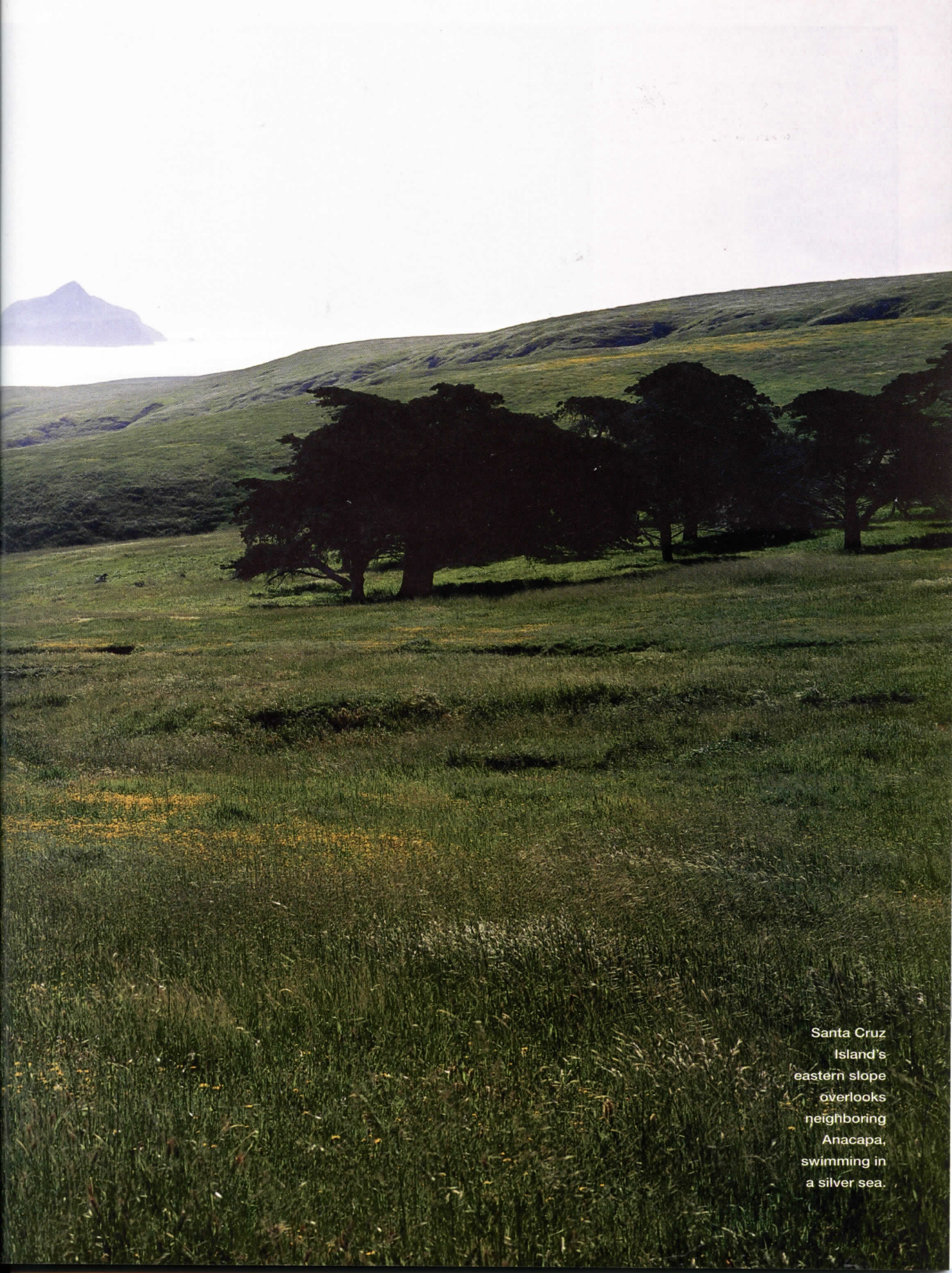
The island is Anacapa, part of Channel Islands National Park, off the Southern California coast. Thirty years ago I was a Boy Scout—a Life Scout gunning for Eagle—camping with my troop here. We were obedient boys, yet Anacapa's dark, salt-blasted beauty incited mutiny. We took a hike, abandoned the marked trail, and scrambled where we had no business going, to the far side of the island, scaling cliffs, swimming coves where seals bobbed in the kelp-crusted waters. We were pirates; we were *conquistadores*, we were Robinson Crusoe and Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo.

We were stranded. The tide rose. It pushed us up the cliff to cling, for hours, on a guano-covered ledge, where seagulls squawked at us. On the other side of the island, messages were being relayed: *Six stupid scouts are missing!* At last, a passing abalone boat rescued us and ferried us back to be yelled at by everyone—by park rangers, scoutmasters, possibly by the gulls and seals.

It was a humiliating moment, and likely one reason I never made Eagle Scout. But over the years, I found myself cherishing the memory of Anacapa itself. For a long time, I thought that feeling was unique, but, apparently, it is not. The Channel Islands have that effect on people. Says islands historian Marla Daily, "When people go out to the islands, they are struck with a feeling they've never experienced before. The vastness, the magnificence—it stuns them."

A long time ago, Anacapa did that to me. Which was why, after so many years, I wanted to return to the islands and see if their magic still held.





Santa Cruz  
Island's  
eastern slope  
overlooks  
neighboring  
Anacapa,  
swimming in  
a silver sea.





Santa Rosa's ranching heritage lingers in landmarks like Bechers Bay pier (left), where cattle boats docked. Below, hikers walk Telephone Road.



## Santa Rosa The Wild West island

The little plane descends over the Santa Barbara Channel and lands on the runway above Bechers Bay. We step down onto Santa Rosa Island.

It's a strange feeling to actually set foot on any of the Channel Islands, and that is due to the peculiar relationship they have with the mainland. For all their proximity—Anacapa, the nearest, lies only 11 miles off the Ventura County coast—most Southern Californians act as if the islands don't exist. They *are* invisible much of the year, dissolved behind a veil of sea mist. Then, for a week or two at a time, they emerge as pale blue silhouettes painted on the ocean horizon. And once in a while—most often in fall when Santa Ana winds blow-dry the ocean haze away—they pop out with such perfect yet foreign clarity, it's as if you were glimpsing the rills and mares of the moon.

There are eight Channel Islands. The five most northerly—Santa Barbara, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel—form Channel Islands National Park. In the 22 years since the park was established, Anacapa and Santa Cruz have received the most visitors, but now, with air flights and improved boat service, Santa Rosa is accessible for day trips.

"Each island has its own heartbeat," says Marla Daily. "Santa Rosa is most like the Wild West."

For nearly 100 years, Santa Rosa was owned by the Vail & Vickers company, which ran a successful cattle operation in an improbable locale. Ranching ended in 1998, but Daily believes "we owe the private owners of the islands a great debt that the islands remained in such remarkable condition."

After landing, day visitors tour around in a four-wheel-drive driven by a park service docent. We steer up ridge-riding roads with precipitous views down to the ocean. (Some roads are, fortunately, bypassed. Pointing to one, our driver says, "The ranger warned me, 'Never take this truck on that road.' And to tell him if I did so he'd know where to pick up the pieces.") Almost everywhere we see sights that make us say, "Look": one of the world's two native stands of Torrey pines; a pelagic cormorant skittering across the waves.

The most impressive show comes last. We drive to the island's south shore, to a gravel beach where 200

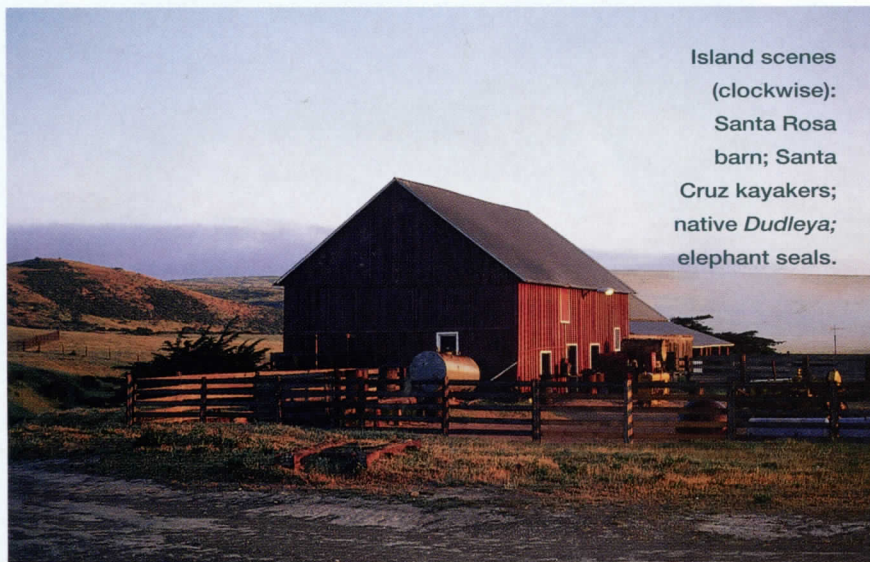


elephant seals loll. They flop on their backs, languidly flipping sand over themselves; bulls snort and butt with those bulbous noses that make them look like W. C. Fields. Then they return to lolling, ignoring their visitors until we get in the truck and leave.

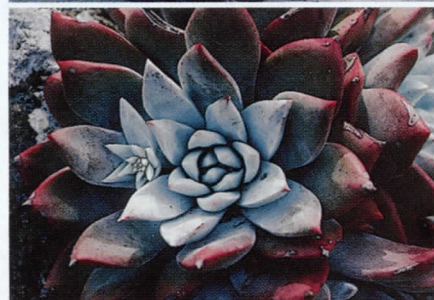
## Santa Cruz The eagle's island

High on a hillside, two 12-week-old bald eagles sit inside a spindly man-made structure called a hack tower. A naturalist pulls a rope, a door opens. The hope is that the eagles will emerge and reclaim Santa Cruz Island as their own. Says Tim Setnicka, superintendent of Channel Islands National Park, "It's incredibly exciting, reintroducing the bald eagle to the islands. They're our keystone species."





Island scenes  
(clockwise):  
Santa Rosa  
barn; Santa  
Cruz kayakers;  
native *Dudleya*;  
elephant seals.



The bald eagles are an important part of the Santa Cruz Island story. The Channel Islands are often called North America's Galapagos, and biologists have found them to be a unique laboratory for natural selection. The island fox is smaller than its mainland relatives; the Santa Cruz Island jay is bigger. More than 100 species of plants and animals live on the islands and nowhere else.

But the islands are not immune to manmade changes. In the 1960s, the bald eagles became victims of DDT. By the '90s another eagle species, the golden eagle, had appeared, drawn to hunt the feral pigs left from the islands' ranching days. When piglets

weren't available, the goldens went after the island fox. Having never known a predator—the bald eagles preferred fish—the foxes were easy prey. Now fox populations have dropped disastrously.

So the park service and the Nature Conservancy (which owns and manages the western half of Santa Cruz) are trying to right things, by relocating the golden eagles off the islands, by launching a fox captive-breeding program, by reintroducing bald eagles. So far, results look encouraging.

But Santa Cruz has charms that go beyond its role as evolutionary laboratory. It is—perhaps—the most beautiful of the islands, and beautiful in a

particularly California way. It looks like a chunk of the Santa Monica Mountains that has floated out to sea. When the sun shines on the cougar-colored hills, you realize you are in Southern California as it was designed to be: golden, sea-kissed, without Sig-Alerts or Botox. You remember that, in the Spanish novel that gave the state its name, California was a mythical island. And you think that this island with foxes and jays and bald eagles—which did finally flap out of their box a few days later—is one of the few places where the true California survives.

## Anacapa The mirage island

It's dismally cold the morning we take the boat over to Anacapa Island. Wool-capped passengers shiver on deck, peering through the fog toward a sea as gray and hard as slate. We dock at Landing Cove, climb the 154 rusty iron steps to the mesa that forms the top of East Island, the most visited portion of Anacapa.

Anacapa is the only one of the Channel Islands that still carries the name the Chumash gave it: *Anyapakh*, miragelike, deceptive. On this mist-soaked morning, you know where the name came from. A melancholy hangs over the islands on a foggy day. You remember the hard, lonely stories. Cabrillo, the islands' first documented European visitor, suffered a bone-shattering fall on an island beach and died three weeks later. He may be buried on San Miguel or Santa Rosa—no one is sure. For their native inhabitants, the Chumash, the islands represent loss: Centuries of island life ended in the early 1800s when Mission priests relocated the Chumash to the mainland.

Then the fog breaks, the sun bursts out, and you're back in Eden. Anacapa is seabird heaven, a vital nesting site for both Western gulls and the brown pelican, and on our



visit the birds were in fine form. It was spring, the gull's nesting season. As we walked the trail toward Cathedral Cove, new mothers squawked and flapped wings to make sure we didn't get close to the wobbling, down-covered chicks.

We followed the trail to an overlook above the island's south coast. I looked down the cliffs to where the waves crashed a couple of hundred feet below. Somewhere down

Anacapa's rugged cliffs are topped by a lighthouse; below, boat passengers are often lucky enough to see dolphins.

there was the ledge from which I'd been rescued.

It's tricky, revisiting the landmarks of your youth. You never know what they've been up to while you've been gone. The view you thought would change your life now has a power line running across it. The mountain you climbed in adolescent triumph turns out to be a weedy hill.

Not here. As Daily says, the Channel Islands retain the power to stun. Waves roared, the gulls cried, the seals bobbed in the kelp. The Pacific swept south all the way to Antarctica. Anybody with a soul would stand there, breathing in the spectacle and think, Yes. I will remember this.



## Channel Islands Travel Planner

September and October are the warmest and least foggy months here. The best place to plan or begin your visit is in Ventura at the **Channel Islands National Park Visitor Center** (1901 Spinnaker Dr.; 805/658-5730 or [www.nps.gov/chis](http://www.nps.gov/chis)), which has displays and information on getting to the islands.

### OFF TO THE ISLANDS

**The islands.** Within the national park, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, and Santa Rosa are the most visitor-friendly.

**Anacapa.** The island nearest the mainland, it's easily visitable in a day or half-day. No beaches, but superb bird-watching. Short, easy trails lead to a small museum and a historic light station.

**Santa Cruz.** Largest of the islands, it offers a lengthy trail system with fine hiking. For a moderately easy hike filled with ocean views, try the 4-mile round trip from Scorpion beach (where most boats land) to Potato Harbor.

**Santa Rosa.** Planes and boats land at Bechers Bay on the northeast shore; plane trips link up with jeep tours of the island. Miles of trails lead to landmarks like the Torrey pines.

### TRANSPORTATION

You can reach the islands by boat from Santa Barbara, Ventura, or Oxnard, or by plane from Camarillo.

**Channel Islands Aviation.** Flights to Santa Rosa Island and four-wheel-drive tours. \$106. (805) 987-1301 or [www.flycia.com](http://www.flycia.com).

**Island Packers.** Boat trips from Ventura Harbor and Channel Islands Harbor in Oxnard to all islands. From \$37. (805) 642-1393 or [www.islandpackers.com](http://www.islandpackers.com).

**Truth Aquatics at Sea Landing.** Boat trips from Santa Barbara Harbor to all islands. From \$60. (805) 963-3564 or [www.truthaquatics.com](http://www.truthaquatics.com).

### KAYAKING THE ISLANDS

The waters around the islands are terrific for kayaking, for beginners to experts. Guided day trips from the following outfitters run about \$180 per person, including equipment rental and boat transportation: **Adventours Outdoor Excursions** (805/899-2929), **Aquasports** (800/773-2309),

**Channel Islands Kayak Center** (805/984-5995), and **Paddle Sports of Santa Barbara** (888/254-2094). **Southwind Kayak Center** (from \$225; 800/768-8494) runs two- and three-day trips.

### CAMPING AND ACCOMMODATIONS

There are campgrounds on Anacapa, Santa Cruz, and Santa Rosa Islands; reserve through the **National Park Service** (800/365-2267 or <http://reservations.nps.gov>). Note that only Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Islands have potable water; elsewhere bring your own. For overnight lodging before or after your island trip, contact the **Santa Barbara Conference & Visitors Bureau** (800/676-1266), the **Ventura Visitors & Convention Bureau** (805/648-2075), or the **Oxnard Convention & Visitors Bureau** (800/269-6273). ♦